CORO

Handel
MESSIAH

CHORUSES

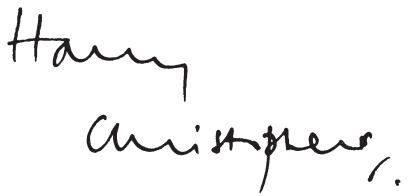
The Sixteen | HARRY CHRISTOPHERS

I doubt whether there is any composer who could match Handel's genius for writing choruses. The day he decided to forgo opera and turn to a new art form, the oratorio, is a day all chamber choirs and large choruses should be thankful for. We are lucky if, in his operas, we get a chorus at the end of each act, but in his oratorios, both sacred and secular, we have a plethora to delight in. He has been the inspiration for the likes of Haydn, Stainer and Elgar to compose great choruses for our phenomenal choral tradition. Of course, it is the *Hallelujah* chorus that has become a beacon of rejoicing from choirs the size of The Sixteen to thousands crammed into the Royal Albert Hall.

Photograph: © Johnny Millar

Handel is quite simply the master of the chorus and there is no doubt that with *Messiah* the choruses dominate. The work has always been a staple in the diet of choral societies, and is revered all the way from Huddersfield Choral

Society to The Bach Choir. It is quite simply a wonderful 'sing' for amateurs and professionals alike. But first and foremost *Messiah* is a masterpiece, the work of a genius. It has never fallen out of favour since the great man's death and it is a work that can truly connect individuals and communities. I always remind people that Handel described *Messiah* as an 'entertainment' and we are treated to an abundance of brilliantly vivid choruses. It is a drama that evolves from Advent, through the Passion of our Lord, bursting into a jubilant finale of resurrection, ascension and the promise of final redemption which culminates in that stupendous *Amen*. Only a great composer with immense skill and artistry like Handel can make over 30 repetitions of the word 'Amen' in each part sound exhilarating and thrilling.



The original recording of *Messiah* (COR16062) was supported by an investment from The Sixteen Messiah Recording Partnership with thanks to Anthony Fry, Robert Gray, Simon Haslam, Mark Loveday, Debbie McMenamin, Damaris Sanderson, and Mark Stadler.

Choruses from MESSIAH

George Frideric Handel

(1685-1759)

from Part 1

1	Symphony *(Instrumental)*	3.10
2	And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed	3.03
3	And he shall purify	2.32
4	O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion *(Air & Chorus)*	5.08
5	For unto us a child is born	4.01
6	Glory to God in the highest	1.58
7	His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light	2.13

from Part 2

8	Behold the Lamb of God	3.12
9	Surely he hath borne our griefs	1.54

10	And with his stripes we are healed	1.51
11	All we like sheep have gone astray	4.13
12	He trusted in God that he would deliver him	2.21
13	Lift up your heads, O ye gates	3.01
14	Let all the angels of God worship him	1.32
15	The Lord gave the word	1.09
16	Their sound is gone out into all lands	1.27
17	Let us break their bonds asunder	1.56
18	Hallelujah!	3.52

from Part 3

19	Since by man came death	2.31
20	But thanks be to God	2.12
21	Worthy is the Lamb that was slain	3.28
22	Amen	3.43

Total running time 60.39

Doing the *Messiah*
A Choral Tradition

As familiar as the work appears today, Handel's *Messiah* once enjoyed an almost common place in popular culture. Richard Hoggart wrote about the oratorio's blindness to class barriers, famously describing boyhood days when chapel choirs and choral societies throughout Yorkshire's West Riding performed the work on high days and holidays. "For weeks before Christmas," he recalled in the late 1950s, "we used to be drafted out of Sunday school in my Primitive Methodist chapel to swell the chorus for the greatest of favourites, the *Messiah*. As we walked through the streets … we noted that the bald brick front of the Wesleyans, three streets off, announced that they, too, were doing the *Messiah* again, and that the plain Methodists on the other side of the 'Moor' were trying *Judas Maccabeus* for a change."

The tradition of 'doing the *Messiah*' remained in good health when those sentences were written, despite threats from punchier secular entertainments. Hoggart guessed that "any moderate-sized working-class crowd in Hunslet" could still supply at least 50 people "who could take up the 'Hallelujah Chorus'". Here was a composition elevated by the ubiquitous addition of the definite article, its music often passed down the family line from one generation of choral singers to the next. Those who aspired to join a first-rate choral society would be expected to know *Messiah*, and might be asked to sing one or other of its choruses before a selection panel. In short, Handel's masterpiece was ingrained in the collective consciousness of amateur choristers and their audiences. Societal shifts and changes charted in Hoggart's influential

study, *The Uses of Literacy*, gathered pace in subsequent decades. The rise of the so-called Early Music Movement and its powerful influence during the last century's closing decades contributed to the list of threats recorded against the choral society tradition. Massed choral performances of *Messiah*, once commonplace, have become rare events. How many Hunsletites, working class or otherwise, would be able to pass the Hoggart 'Hallelujah Chorus' test today? 15, perhaps, or maybe a solid dozen, but surely not 50.

I make the point not to belittle the often excellent work of our amateur choirs or the eclectic, innovative repertoire that so many have to offer. *Messiah*, however, has dropped low on the radar screen of their activity, despite the sterling work of small-scale ensembles and youthful chamber choirs. Those who tackle it for the first time expecting an easy Handelian ride discover that the composer's part-writing requires technical skill, stamina and a surprising level of virtuosity. 'His yoke is easy', as the chorus runs: Handel's contrapuntal setting of the text here is anything but easy. Neither is the vocal finesse demanded by the rapid-fire 'we have turned' figures in 'All we like sheep have gone astray' or the boisterous roulades that decorate 'And he shall purify'. *Messiah* tests the vocal fitness and musical expertise of choristers and soloists alike.

The Sixteen is populated with singers fully armed to deal with Handel's tricks and turns; moreover, its members bring a corporate distinction to *Messiah* in performance that far exceeds its technical challenges. The foundations clearly rest on an abundance of good things. In choral terms, rock-steady intonation; incisive yet unforced diction; unanimous ensemble and articulation, and the dependably lyrical unfolding of melodic lines underpin The Sixteen's work here, comparable to the superior

nuts and bolts of a winning Formula One car. Their accomplished expertise, fully captured in this recording, has been honed by 150 or so performances, a statistic that would have amazed even the serial *Messiah* singers of Richard Hoggart's Yorkshire youth. Vocal efficiency and excellence, however, do not alone a Sixteen *Messiah* make. Surface detail and deeper structural relationships, successively shaped by Harry Christophers and his colleagues, carry the weight of the argument here to catch the ear and hold it with a register of compelling interpretative ideas. It is worth recalling one contemporary reaction to Handel's composition, in which the work was judged to be closer to a succession of hymns or anthems than an oratorio conceived for performance in theatres and secular spaces. That view sharply conflicts with the presentation in this recording of distinct groups of related movements, strategically placed moments of rest, and an interpretation shaped by an overriding dramatic vision. For example, the sequence of choruses dealing with the Messiah's intercession for the sins of mankind, beginning with 'Surely he hath born our griefs', drives forward with great urgency towards Handel's theatrical and theological masterstroke, a stripped-down setting of Isaiah's prophecy: 'And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all'. The solo tenor's subsequent accompanied recitative (which can be heard on the complete recording, COR16062), with its fearful 'smiting' figure in the violins, erupts out of a silence made the more telling by the unbridled energy of what has gone before.

On the matter of surface detail, listen to the pointed articulation of the words 'that was slain' in 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain', a simple effect that gains from its quieter retelling. The eloquent phrasing given to the work's closing 'Amen' complements the noble simplicity of Handel's inventive counterpoint. Those final eighty-eight

bars, among the most sublime in *Messiah*, can all too often sound like a sepia tonal wash applied to the tailend of a taxing performance. Earlier in the piece, from the sighing viola figures in the Overture's fugue in fact, we meet unexpected nuance, idiomatic contrasts and insightful expressive gestures.

The communicative power of The Sixteen's *Messiah*, fuelled by the oratorio's expressive variety, connects words and music directly to listeners in a secular age, believers and unbelievers alike. The "enormous-bosomed women and fierce old men" of Richard Hoggart's chapel choir *Messiah* performances would surely have sung Amen to that.

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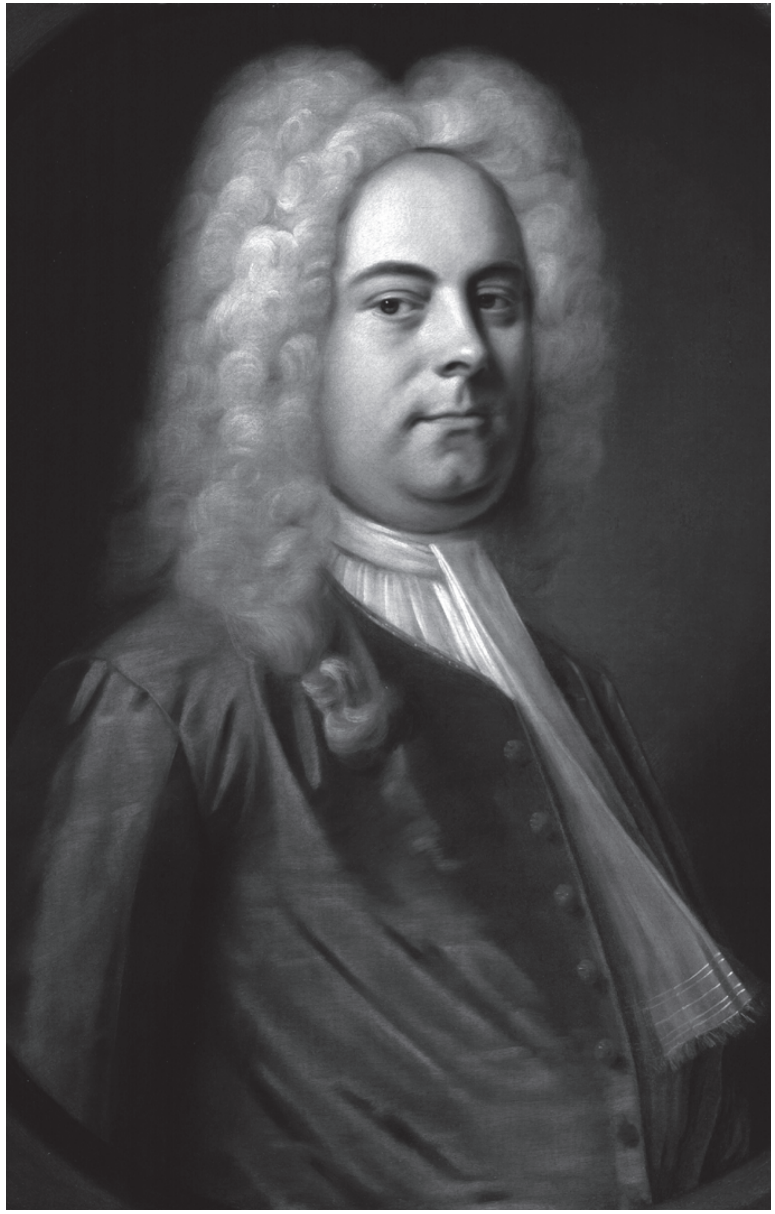

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Attributed to Balthasar Denner
1726 (detail)

1 Symphony
(Instrumental)

2 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together:
for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

(Isaiah XL 5)

3 And he shall purify

And he shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord
an offering in righteousness.

(Malachi III 3)

4 O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion

Including Air (alto: Catherine Wyn-Rogers) and Chorus

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, arise, say unto the cities of Judah,
Behold your God! Behold! The glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

(Isaiah XL 9; LX 1)

5 For unto us a child is born

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God,
the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

(Isaiah IX 6)

6 Glory to God in the highest

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men.

(Luke II 14)

7 His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light

His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light.

(Matthew XI 30)

8 Behold the Lamb of God

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

(John I 29)

9 Surely he hath borne our griefs

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.
He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities,
the chastisement of our peace was upon him.

(Isaiah LIII 4-5)

10 And with his stripes we are healed

And with his stripes we are healed.

(Isaiah LIII 5)

11 All we like sheep have gone astray

All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way.
And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

(Isaiah LIII 6)

12 He trusted in God that he would deliver him

He trusted in God that he would deliver him:
let him deliver him if he delight in him.

(Psalm XXII 9)

13 Lift up your heads, O ye gates

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors,
and the King of Glory shall come in.
Who is the King of Glory?
The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.
The Lord of Hosts: he is the King of Glory.

(Psalm XXIV 7-10)

14 Let all the angels of God worship him

Let all the angels of God worship him.

(Hebrews I 6)

15 The Lord gave the word

The Lord gave the word, great was the company of the preachers.

(Psalm LXVIII 12)

16 Their sound is gone out into all lands

Their sound is gone out into all lands,
and their words unto the ends of the world.

(Romans X 18)

17 Let us break their bonds asunder

Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us.

(Psalm II 3)

18 Hallelujah!

Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ:
and he shall reign for ever and ever.
King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.
Hallelujah!

(Revelation XIX 6; XI 15; XIX 16)

19 Since by man came death

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.
For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

(I Corinthians XV 51-52)

20 But thanks be to God

But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(I Corinthians XV 57)

21 Worthy is the Lamb that was slain

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,
and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power, and riches,
and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.
Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne
and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever.

(Revelation V 12-13)

22 Amen

Amen.

The Sixteen

SOPRANO
Julie Cooper
Grace Davidson
Alison Hill
Kirsty Hopkins
Charlotte Mobbs
Rebecca Outram

ALTO
Ian Aitkenhead
David Clegg
William Missin
Christopher Royall

TENOR
Simon Berridge
Jeremy Budd
Mark Dobell
David Roy

BASS
Jonathan Arnold
Ben Davies
Eamonn Dougan
Jimmy Holliday
Timothy Jones

VIOLIN I
Walter Reiter *leader*
Jean Paterson
Andrea Morris
Iwona Muszynska
Ellen O'Dell
Henrietta Wayne
Peter Fender

VIOLIN II
Miles Golding *principal*
Theresa Caudle
Stephen Jones
Claire Mera-Nelson
Rebecca Miles

VIOLA
Annette Isserlis *principal*
Martin Kelly
Stefanie Heichelheim

VIOLONCELLO
Joseph Crouch *principal*
Imogen Seth-Smith

DOUBLE BASS
Jan Spencer

OBOE
Anthony Robson *principal*
Catherine Latham

BASSOON
Sally Jackson

TRUMPET
Robert Farley *solo*
Christopher Pigram

TIMPANI
Charles Fullbrook

THEORBO
David Miller

HARPSICHORD
Gary Cooper

ORGAN
Alastair Ross

Harry Christophers stands among today's great champions of choral music. In partnership with The Sixteen, the ensemble he founded over 40 years ago, he has set benchmark standards for the performance of everything from late medieval polyphony to important new works by contemporary composers. His international influence is supported by more than 150 recordings and has been enhanced by his work as Artistic Director of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society and as a guest conductor worldwide.

The Sixteen's soundworld, rich in tonal variety and expressive nuance, reflects Christophers' determination to create a vibrant choral instrument from the blend of adult professional singers. Under his leadership The Sixteen has established its annual Choral Pilgrimage to cathedrals, churches and other UK venues, created the *Sacred Music* series for BBC television, and developed an acclaimed period-instrument orchestra. Highlights of their recent work include an Artist Residency at Wigmore Hall, a large-scale tour of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*, and the world premiere of James MacMillan's *Symphony No. 5, 'Le grand Inconnu'*; their future projects, meanwhile, comprise a new series devoted to Purcell and an ongoing survey of Handel's dramatic oratorios.

Harry served as Artistic Director of the Handel and Haydn Society for 13 years, and has recently been appointed their Conductor Laureate. He was also appointed as Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Granada Orchestra in 2008 and has worked as guest conductor with, among others, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Deutsches Kammerphilharmonie. Christophers' extensive commitment to opera has embraced productions for English National Opera and Lisbon Opera and work with the Granada, Buxton and Grange festivals.

He was awarded a CBE in the Queen's 2012 Birthday Honours for his services to music. He is an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, as well as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the Royal School of Church Music, and has Honorary Doctorates in Music from the Universities of Leicester, Northumbria, Canterbury Christ Church and Kent. He is also President of the Cathedral Music Trust.

§ The Sixteen

Whether performing a simple medieval hymn or expressing the complex musical and emotional language of a contemporary choral composition, The Sixteen does so with qualities common to all great ensembles. Tonal warmth, rhythmic precision and immaculate intonation are clearly essential to the mix. But it is the courage and intensity with which The Sixteen makes music that speak above all to so many people.

The Sixteen gave its first concert in 1979 under the direction of Founder and Conductor Harry Christophers CBE. Their pioneering work since has made a profound impact on the performance of choral music and attracted a large new audience, not least as 'The Voices of Classic FM' and through BBC television's *Sacred Music* series.

The voices and period-instrument players of The Sixteen are at home in over five centuries of music, a breadth reflected in their annual Choral Pilgrimage to Britain's great cathedrals and sacred spaces, regular appearances at the world's leading concert halls, and award-winning recordings for The Sixteen's CORO and other labels.

Recent highlights include the world premiere of James MacMillan's *Symphony No. 5, 'Le grand Inconnu'*, commissioned for The Sixteen by the Genesis Foundation, an ambitious ongoing series of Handel oratorios, and a debut tour of China.

Recording Producer: Mark Brown)
Recording Engineer: Mike Hatch (Floating Earth)
Mastering Engineer: Tom Lewington (Floating Earth)
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Harpsichord: supplied and tuned by Malcolm Greenhalgh
Organ: supplied and tuned by N P Mander Ltd
Design: Andrew Giles

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